

Part 5

Law and Education

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu

Examining How Students Are Engaging in Their Teaching and Learning Activities: A Case Study of Higher Education Students in a London University, London Campus

Abstract

This research project examines how international students are engaging with teaching and learning activities at a London based University. The research is at its pilot stage and will be focusing on one of the Business modules, namely MSc Human Resource Management, offered at the London University Campus. The project will seek to explore students' views on different teaching and learning activities of the module and how these have engaged and motivated them in their learning, and to identify areas for improvement. The main aim and purpose of this initial research is to find out which of the teaching and learning activities students found most helpful in their learning and to make suggestions on areas for improvement. A literature review and initial investigations identified 11 key teaching and learning activities mapped on this programme that are used according to the topics delivered each week: lectures, seminars, case studies, discussions, videos, debates, group work, individual work, class tests, quizzes, and guest speakers. The implementation of these activities will be investigated using variety of research methods, including quantitative surveys to explore the views of students doing this module, through on-line questionnaires, and in-class completion of questionnaires. It is anticipated that this pilot research will inform future research across other London University modules to promote the sharing of good practice and to fully support, engage and motivate students in their programme of studies. Recommendations will be made based on the students' feedback.

Keywords: students, engaging, motivation, internationalisation, retention, achievement, teaching and learning activities, implementation, good practice

Introduction

Student engagement and motivation are crucial in academic achievement. Examining classroom activities and how students at a London based University feel they have impacted their learning, can help us understand how this engagement and motivation can be strengthened. The London based University is currently in partnership with five universities. The majority of the students are foreign, with English as their second language. For the purposes of this project, the focus is on the Business students studying an MSc Human Resource Management module, based at

one of the London Campuses. This study will investigate how students are engaging with, and motivated by, the teaching and learning activities of this programme, and their perceptions of how these have helped to enhance their learning on this module. The key objectives will be to:

- examine how learning activities engage MSc HRM students;
- explore other dimensions of student engagement, such as behavioural, emotional or cognitive, that help to identify each student's ways of responding to classroom activities and how these have enabled them to be engaged in their studies;
- analyse students' perceptions on how they are engaging and motivated with the learning activities on their MSc HRM module;
- suggest other activities relevant to engaging students that can help them complete their programme for this module.

Literature review

Student engagement and motivation to learn

Much research has been carried out into the causes of students' engagement and motivation to study, highlighting the multi-faceted nature of engagement with learning activities, and the consequences – disengagement, demotivation, and ultimately drop-out – if students are not fully engaged with learning activities. The University for this study is presented as X University in the UK. The University recruits students from abroad, indicating that majority of the students are international, for whom English is a second language, with different ways of learning in their home countries. This presents potential challenges for them in adapting to studying in a British university. When students come to study from abroad, it is particularly important to engage them with rich learning activities as most of them come to study abroad to gain good and quality education that may not be the same as in their home countries. Therefore, most of the students expect enriched learning activities from their lessons. Failure to fully engage students in a classroom can lead to non-completion or drop-out (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2008), although other factors can affect students' disengagement from their studies such as financial constraints (Martinez & Munday, 1998), the learning environment (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2008; Tinto, 1988).

This subject is of pivotal importance to the X University as an international recruiter of foreign students. One of the University's aims is to develop a strategy to fully support student's engagement and to widen participation for the London Campus students. Looking in detail at the effectiveness of different classroom activities, and how well they engage international students in their learning, can play a key part in this. An overview of the literature in this area points us towards the key issues that may impact on students' levels of classroom engagement. Exploring other dimensions of student engagement, such as behavioural, emotional or cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004) helps to identify a student's way of responding to classroom activities and how these have enabled them to be engaged in their studies. Although, many of the action research projects on student engagement and motivation tend to focus on cognitive dimensions of student engagement, all three of these dimensions have provided useful explanations

as to how students can be engaged in their learning based on these factors (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

Behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement

Behavioural engagement consists of school related conduct, involvement in learning, attendance, participation and related activities. Behavioural engagement as defined by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), is the active participation in school in general as well as in classroom related activities or work. The assumption here presents the facts that students who are behaviourally engaged would always attend their lessons, follow the lectures or teachers' instructions, participate in classroom activities and complete their assignments.

Emotional engagement, on the other hand, encompasses positive and negative reactions in the class, relationships with the teachers, peers and school in terms of either belonging or connectedness (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012; Tinto, 2007).

Cognitive engagement consists of self-regulated learning, whether learning is perceived as relevant and deep learning strategies for comprehensive or complex ideas (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Wang & Degol, 2012). It encompasses self-regulated learning such as school course work (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2008).

Other dimensions of student engagement

Other factors linked to student engagement include academic background (Tinto, 1988; Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008), social engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Fredricks et al., 2016), as well as agentic engagement. Agentially engaged students, as identified by Reeve (2012), are architects of their own motivation, proactively trying to personalize and enhance their learning context by offering input, making suggestions, expressing preferences, and more. As they constructively contribute to their education, agentially engaged learners' behaviours affect their learning positively. The work of Hu and Kuh (2001) has centred around how educationally purposeful activities can influence students and institutions. Online and general campus-based student engagement has also been found to contribute to students' academic engagement (Coates, 2007).

The relevance of these factors is confirmed by my own experiences and observations as a lecturer. There are clearly different components to a student's engagement, which are present both within and outside the classroom, with these different types of engagement having the potential to be mutually reinforcing to either enhance or diminish a student's motivation to learn. Biggs and Tang (2007) identify that one of the problems teachers face is getting students motivated to engage in learning. Student motivation to learn helps them to be fully engaged; the findings of my own research have concluded that students will remain to complete their programme of study if they have effective teaching and learning as well as motivation (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2008). The range of learning activities provided within each module brings these different types of engagement together and ensuring they complete their programme of study. However, the question remains: how relevant are these dimensions to international students at a London based X University dominated by international students? How applicable are the three

dimensions of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement for international students in this context?

The impact of enriched learning activities

Enriched learning activities can help engage students in their learning which may present positive outcomes on retention and achievement. This is particularly pertinent for international students studying in London X University institutions. Firstly, because they already faced challenges in adjusting to different styles of teaching and learning to that which they are used to in their home countries, with the additional factor that English is often not their first language. Secondly, because of the significant fees paid by international students to gain a foreign education, there may be an increased expectation of enriched learning activities within their programmes of study and the ability of the teachers and the institutions to provide students with enriched learning activities and conducive learning environment, students will be more happy to fully be engaged in the programme of studies as the case may be with the international students on the MSc International HR programme.

Student's engagement in their learning is helpful in developing lifelong skills useful for their future employment. Engaging students fully in classroom activities has a big impact on student retention and achievement. The three dimensions of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004) can enable students' development of essential skills that impact on academic achievement and adjustment as well as completion of a programme of study (Archambault et al., 2009). Behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, as described above, are pronounced in the life and engagement of international students studying at the X University in the UK, therefore, failure to equip them with relevant teaching activities risks them becoming disengaged, leading to demotivation and withdrawal from their programme of study without achieving.

Another key point to address is to find out why student engagement with enriched learning activities at the X University is very important to me as a Lecturer and also for the students. Engaging students with enriched learning activities (using effective teaching and learning approaches in lectures, seminars and group work) can improve motivation, academic adjustments, grade achievement, academic aspirations and completion (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2008; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Martinez, 1996; Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001), attendance and persistence (Waldrop et al., 2019). Moreover, Li and Lerner (2011) provide evidence of a correlation with favourable mental health outcomes as well as reduced levels of depression and suicidal thoughts and behaviour (Marraccini & Brier, 2017) and higher life satisfaction (Lewis et al., 2012).

Engaging students with rich learning activities helps students to think positively, focus, and prevents students from bad behaviour (Fredricks et al., 2016). On the other hand, when students are disengaged, it can also lead to level of bad behaviour, hence leading them to withdraw or drop out without achieving. Engagement of students in the classroom also has wider implications for their engagement with the institution as a whole. Behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively engaged students are more likely to comply with the educational rules and regulations of the University, e.g. to attend all the scheduled classes. As a practitioner in education,

engagement becomes part of my policy implementation to ensure varied teaching activities as the findings below explain. Further to the discussion above, student disengagement can also impose stresses on the teacher (Fredricks et al., 2016). Taking all of these together, it is essential that lecturers motivate students with engaging learning activities that help to motivate them to succeed and overcome the additional challenges associated with being international students.

The paper will present the impact of four learning activities (lecture, seminar, group work, and assessment) used in teaching international students at the X University London based Campus. It will present the perceptions of students on how they are engaging with these learning activities and the relationship to the three theoretical dimensions (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement) and how this impact on students' learning. The findings of the research will help to inform areas for improvement and future research.

Methodology

Due to the protocols of permission to conduct the research on current students to accomplish this study, and my focus on a specific institution, I have used the term X University students for this study that focused on completers of programme who left the University and either returned back to their home countries or were still in the UK. My original intention was to use interviews to capture the views of the current students using classroom period. However, this plan was changed to focusing on the completers-leavers at this initial stage and it is seen as very important to hear from the completers-leavers first. The mini study used both a quantitative and qualitative approach to the research. The secondary data focused on reading relevant literature around the chosen topic. Primary research was designed to involve a telephone interview with the completers-leavers. My target was to interview 30 leavers. However, I was able to get 10 students through a WhatsApp group. Participants were very happy to be part of the interview. The use of telephone interview was relevant in this research as I concentrated on completers or leavers and it was not easy to access them. The participants were over 18 years of age and were happy to participate after explaining to them the need for the research. I also reassured them of the confidentiality of the information except for the purpose of this paper for presentation and publication. Once the ethics of the research were fully observed, I went ahead with the telephone interview in the evenings after work. Some of the information gathered is discussed below.

Discussion of findings

The research findings clearly correlate with the findings of the literature presented above. I have chosen to highlight one of the comments from the participants here due to the constraints of space. However, as work in progress, also at its initial stage, the full findings will be presented in my future work. One comment from a participant, based on one of the interview questions, is presented below.

Q1. Which of the learning activities applies to your teaching and learning in this University – lecture, seminar or working in a group?

My teacher uses all the three in our lessons and they are all interesting activities that are engaging. However, lecture and seminar activities are my main priority if I have to choose. For instance, after the interesting lecture, the seminar session helps us to understand the lesson more as we will now put things into practice and it is then you can appreciate the lesson, for me, the enriched activities in my lecture and seminar motivate me to attend the lessons. (R2)

Conclusion

The focus of the work was to explore how international students responded to their learning activities and the impact on their motivation, behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. It explored relevant and prior literature that helped the focus of the mini research. Students' comments indicate some correlation between what the students said and the literature. The most predominant links were the work of Achinewhu-Nworgu (2008), Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) and other literature presented above, which have all contributed to the conclusion on findings of the mini research. One could go on with transcribing the questions asked and the responses, however, due to the word limit the findings will be shared in more detailed discussion and the link to literature in my future papers. The future work will therefore progress with what emerged from the research and will aim to present full findings of the overall work at a later stage.

References

- Achinewhu-Nworgu, E. (2008): Nine Key Strategies Promoting Student Retention in London Further Education Colleges. *Comparative Education, Teacher Training, Education Policy and Social Inclusion* (pp. 257-264). BCES Conference Books, Vol. 6. Sofia: Bureau for Educational Services.
- Appleton, J. J., Christenson, S. L. & Furlong, M. J. (2008): Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 369-386.
- Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J. & Pagani, L. (2009): Adolescent Behavioral, Affective, and Cognitive Engagement in School: Relationship to Dropout. *Journal of School Health*, 79(9), 408-415.
- Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007): *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does*. 3rd Ed. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Christenson, S. L., Reschly, A. L. & Wylie, C. (Eds.) (2012): *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media.
- Coates, H. (2007): A Model of Online and General Campus-Based Student Engagement. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(2), 121-141.
- Finn, J. D. & Zimmer, K. S. (2012): Student engagement: What is it? Why does it matter? In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly & C. Wylie (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 97-131). New York: Springer Science and Business Media.
- Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C. & Paris, A. H. (2004): School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109.
- Fredricks, J. A., Wang, M. T., Linn, J. S., Hofkens, T. L., Sung, H., Parr, A. & Allerton, J. (2016): Using qualitative methods to develop a survey measure of math and science engagement. *Learning and Instruction*, 43, 5-15.

- Hodkinson, P. & Bloomer, M. (2001): Dropping out of further education: complex causes and simplistic policy assumptions. *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 117-140.
- Hu, S. & Kuh, G. D. (2001): Being (Dis) Engaged in Educationally Purposeful Activities: The Influences of Student and Institutional Characteristics. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference.
- Lewis, C. C., Perry, R. R., Friedkin, S. & Roth, J. R. (2012): Improving Teaching Does Improve Teachers: Evidence from Lesson Study. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 63(5), 368-375.
- Li, Y. & Lerner, R. M. (2011): Trajectories of school engagement during adolescence: Implications for grades, depression, delinquency, and substance use. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(1), 233-247.
- Marraccini, M. E. & Brier, Z. M. F. (2017): School connectedness and suicidal thoughts and behaviors: A systematic meta-analysis. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 32(1), 5-21.
- Martinez, P. & Munday, F. (1998): *9,000 Voices: student persistence and dropout in further education*. FEDA Report, 2(7). London: Further Education Development Agency.
- Martinez, P. (1996): *Student Retention: Case studies of strategies that work*. FEDA Paper, 1(6). London: Further Education Development Agency.
- Reeve, J. (2012): A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly & C. Wylie (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 149-172). New York: Springer Science and Business Media.
- Tinto, V. (1988): Stages of Student Departure: Reflection on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(4), 438-455.
- Tinto, V. (2007): Taking Student Retention Seriously. https://www.umes.edu/uploadedFiles/DEPARTMENTS/Academic_Affairs/Content/_1-Taking%20Student%20Retention%20Seriously.pdf (Accessed 15/2/2020).
- Waldrop, D., Reschly, A. L, Fraysier, K. & Appleton, J. J. (2019): Measuring the Engagement of College Students: Administration Format, Structure, and Validity of the Student Engagement Instrument–College. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, 52(2), 99-107.
- Wang, M. T. & Degol, J. (2012): Staying Engaged: Knowledge and Research Needs in Student Engagement. *Child Development Perspectives*, 8(3), 137-143.

Dr. Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu, QAHE - in Partnership with Ulster, Northumbria, Roehampton, Middlesex & Solent Universities London & Ireland